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## I am Navy Medicine: Lt. Danielle Berkowitz, voyage on USNS Mercy

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The day I reported to the Mercy it was freezing cold for San Diego standards and pouring rain. With two sea bags, my uniforms and my backpack, I sloshed through a torrential downpour. A petty officer I had never met offered me help, as would be common in the months to come. As I walked across the brow,

my lack of proper ship etiquette gave me away, wondering, “What have I gotten myself into?” The answer was soon to come, discovering most decidedly that it wouldn’t be a leisurely four and a half month cruise, but an amazing adventure.

Before even graduating dental school, getting the chance to be a dental officer aboard a hospital ship for a humanitarian mission was on my bucket list. As a young lieutenant, I was nothing short of euphoric when I learned I was given the opportunity to fill Mercy’s pediatric dentistry billet during Pacific Partnership 2015 (PP15).

On the ship, the dental team got to work immediately. Underway we focused on getting ready for community health engagements (CHE) and subject matter expert exchanges. The team’s corpsmen worked tirelessly to organize everything needed to make the CHE’s successful. The hours we worked in each port were long and rewarding.



Underway we focused on getting ready for community health engagements (CHE) and subject matter expert exchanges.

A typical day went as so: wake up at 0430. Check in at dental to make sure everything was ready to go. Attend daily operational briefs. Take muster. Make sure the team had meal’s ready to eat (MRE) and enough water for the day.



Despite the challenges and adjusting to the ever-demanding schedule, I treated patients in four countries that I may never have visited otherwise.

On shore, we would drive to our CHE site where hundreds of patients awaited our arrival. After seeing hundreds of patients, we'd breakdown for the day, and head back to the ship to hopefully make it back in time for chow, although highly unlikely. Fill out an after action report or two. Attend one or two meetings to discuss how the day went and what changes to make for the next day and in the future. PT, shower, and finish with re-stocking supplies. Try to get to bed by midnight, and do it all over again. In addition to my free time, whatever that was, I worked on my surface warfare medical department officer (SWMDO) qualifications and got certified in pediatric advanced life support (PALS).

This was my life mid-May through late September. I had maybe eight full days off the entire summer, including weekends. My family and friends had to cancel trips they'd planned to visit me in Japan. My fiancé worried over my safety and lack of sleep. Yet if I was asked to do it again, I would sign up in a heartbeat.

Despite the challenges and adjusting to the ever-demanding schedule, I treated patients in four countries that I may never have visited otherwise. Each country got better and better, from Fiji to Papua New Guinea, then the Philippines and finally Vietnam. I worked with dentists in each country as well as dentists from partner nations such as Korea, Canada, Malaysia, and my two favorites, Japan and Australia.

I even worked with Army counterparts during their community health outreach events aboard the expeditionary fast transport vessel [USNS Millinocket \(T-EPF 3\)](#), while Mercy was pier side in Subic Bay, Philippines and had no CHE's scheduled.

During PP15 I probably extracted more than 600 teeth, and was a key contributor treating about 4,000 patients and being involved in almost 13,000 procedures, as well as treating children in larger, more comprehensive cases. These numbers don't even count the work I accomplished with the Army on Millinocket.



The experience reminded me of why I became a dentist, and why I joined the Navy—to serve my country and to help people.

The very first patient I saw was a six year-old girl, swollen, with a fever and in pain. Dentists in Fiji had tried to extract her teeth without success and had given up. She was unable to sleep and unable to go to school. We were done screening patients, but looking at her we knew we just couldn't let her leave. She cried walking to the ship, but aboard I was able to calm her down and extract her infected teeth. She instantly felt better. Her mom couldn't have been more thankful. It was the first of many instances of how my summer was spent- increasing the quality of people's lives.

Reflecting on my experience, I think about how hard I worked and how much that effort made a difference. Not only did I change lives, but they changed mine too. The experience reminded me of why I became a dentist, and why I joined the Navy—to serve my country and to help people.

Although the days were long and the weeks longer, I never wanted to stop, and the hard work of the corpsmen kept me going harder. Rest was never an option and never something wanted. My life is forever changed by those I met and helped those four and a half months.

It was by far one of the most challenging yet most memorable and rewarding experiences of my life.

I'm Lt. Danielle Berkowitz. I am Navy Medicine.

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